

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 9, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Lori Chavez-DeRemer  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20210

The Honorable Doug Burgum  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary Rollins, Secretary Burgum, and Secretary Chavez-DeRemer:

Every day, wildland firefighters risk their lives to combat wildfire and keep us safe from longer and more extreme fire seasons. This often requires multiple days and weeks – and sometimes months - being exposed to the smoke and other products of combustion generated from these fires. Experts have clearly stated that “there is no safe level of exposure to wildfire smoke.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, compared to regular air pollution, wildfire smoke is approximately 10 times as toxic and breathing it in can cause a wide range of negative health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Keeping wildland firefighters safe from – not just wildfires – but also the effects of smoke exposure is vital to ensuring this workforce can continue to keep us safe.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that short term exposure over multiple days or up to a few weeks, which is the standard deployment for a wildland firefighter can lead to a reduction in lung function. Additional short-term effects over a matter of hours or days includes irritation to the eyes and respiratory tract, immediate respiratory symptoms and effects, cardiovascular effects, and an increased risk of death related to inhaling the toxicants and particulate matter found in smoke. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention echo these potential health risks and has identified first responders to wildland fire as a key group at an increased risk of these impacts.<sup>3</sup>

One key tool in protecting against this exposure is wearing a proper mask to mitigate the respiratory negative health outcomes of smoke inhalation – a recommendation that researchers have been making to Forest Service since at least 1997.<sup>4</sup> However, still no masks or other type of

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Jordan, *What we know about the health effects of wildfire*, Stanford Report (Jan. 10, 2025), <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/01/assessing-wildfire-health-risks>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *How Wildfire Smoke Affects Your Body*, CDC (Apr. 19, 2024), <https://www.cdc.gov/wildfires/risk-factors/index.html>.

respiratory protection is provided to federal wildland firefighters as a part of their personal protective equipment (PPE).

These issues were brought to light most recently in a New York Times Article on August 17, 2025, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*.

Please provide responses to the following questions by Tuesday, September 30, 2025:

1. What information is provided to wildland firefighters regarding the health effects related to wildfire smoke exposure?
  - a. What additional preventative measures is the agency considering? Do these measures include paying for medical evaluations?
2. What, if any, monitoring do personnel working in close proximity to wildfires conduct related to air quality?
3. What steps have each of your agencies taken to provide adequate respiratory protection to wildland firefighters from the immediate and long-term health effects of smoke exposure?
  - a. What can be done to protect firefighters when not on fire lines?
  - b. What are feasible options for fire camp locations, masks and/or respirators in camps and in vehicles during transport to and from fire lines?
4. What additional resources, if any, do your agencies need in order to provide adequate respiratory protection, including masks, to wildland firefighters while they are on assignment?
5. When engaged in structural fire operations, do standards that apply to municipal fire departments for PPE and respiratory protection apply to Forest Service firefighters?
6. What is the current status of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs' Special Claims Unit that handled wildland firefighter injury and illness claims, particularly long-term occupational disease cases such as presumptive cancers?
  - a. Does the unit still exist, and if so, how many Claims Examiners are currently assigned to it?
  - b. When a current or former firefighter submits a claim, how long is the average wait time for a response, for a medical assessment, and for treatment?
  - c. If it has been disbanded, what was the rationale, and how is the agency assessing the impact on affected claimants?
7. In December 2024 and January 2025, the Department of Labor published notices of intent to expand the list of cancers presumed to result from exposures faced by federal firefighters. These included several cancers disproportionately affecting female firefighters. Since then, no further action appears to have been taken. When can we expect these presumptive diagnoses to be formally updated through notice and comment?
  - a. If they will not be updated, what is the basis for rejecting the agency's own expert's medical opinion?
8. What are the Department's plans to work with frontline workers on these issues, including unions and other employee organizations, particularly in protecting wildland

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Dreier, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*, NYTimes (Aug. 17, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>.


firefighter health and safety, addressing presumptive cancers, and improving claims processing?

- a. How do the Departments intend to incorporate frontline worker input into policy development and implementation?

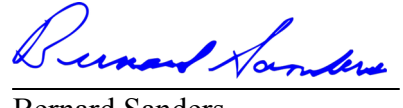
We hope to work with you to ensure that our federal firefighters, who put their lives on the line to protect the public and their public lands, are appropriately protected themselves.


Sincerely,

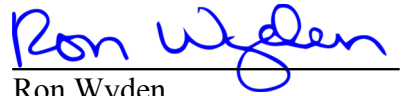
  
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
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Ron Wyden  
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